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Chapter 9

Precious possession, war, or journey? Conceptual metaphors for *life* in American English, Hungarian, and Polish

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The present paper aims at analyzing the similarities and differences between the conceptualization of *life* in American English, Hungarian, and Polish. The concept of life belongs to abstract and fuzzy concepts, which are usually conceptualized by means of metaphor. The comparison of the conceptual metaphors for life in American English and Hungarian was presented in Kövecses (2005) on the basis of one of his students' survey. The study revealed differences in the conceptualizations of life in the two languages, ascribed to the disparate cultural experiences of Americans and Hungarians. The questionnaire used in that research has been employed to study the metaphors for life used by a group of native speakers of Polish. The results allow us to compare the metaphorical conceptualizations of life in American English, Hungarian, and Polish.

Key words: life, conceptual metaphor, conceptualization, cultural motivation, contrastive analysis

9.1 Introduction

The aim of the paper is to compare the conceptual metaphors underlying the conceptualization of the words *life*, *élet*, and *życie* in American English, Hungarian, and Polish, respectively. Various dictionaries of English provide at least eight different senses of “life” and dictionaries of Polish list around six different meanings of “życie”. This is so because the concept of *life* is abstract and fuzzy, which means that its

boundaries are not clearly delineated. In line with the assumptions of cognitive semantics, such concepts can be apprehended and described by referring to more concrete domains through the mechanism of metaphor. Various authors provide a number of conceptual metaphors for the concept of life present in English and other languages (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Kövecses 2005, 2010).

Nevertheless, it seems that in this case, the most common patterns of conceptualization are not universal, but motivated by cultural experiences of specific nations. For instance, Zoltán Kövecses (2005) offers a comparison of the most dominant metaphors for life in American English and Hungarian. The question asked in our study is: How do these results compare to the Polish language? On the basis of the answers given to the questions about life by a group of Polish native speakers it is possible to identify the most common metaphors for *life* in Polish, as well as some untypical ones, and compare the results for Polish, American English, and Hungarian.

9.2 What is *life*?

The concept of *life* belongs to the so-called fuzzy concepts, whose boundaries are not clear cut (O'Grady 1997: 276). As suggested by such dictionaries of English as OALD (2000: 773–774) and MED (2002: 823–824), the definitions of *life* can be grouped into eight categories. The basic meanings are represented by the following four definitions:

1. the state, condition or quality of living, as opposed to the state of being dead;
2. the period of time between birth and death or part of this period;
3. the manner or experiences and activities typical of a human being's existence;
4. the energy, animation, vitality, and excitement as qualities of a being;

Additionally, the word “life” is often used in English with the following senses:

5. living organisms or beings;
6. a type of art based on painting living beings;
7. a story of life or a biography;
8. a kind of punishment (life imprisonment).

Interestingly, among the various definitions of *life*, AHD (2009) incorporates also the sense of “a spiritual state regarded as transcending of corporeal death”.

When it comes to the meanings of “life” in Polish, the senses provided by NSJP (2002) and WSJP (online) correspond to the senses (1)–(4) listed above. Additionally, in the dictionaries of Polish there are such meanings as “functioning of something” or “maintenance and board”, which seem to be absent from the dictionaries of English.

9.3 Conceptual metaphors for *life*

As claimed and presented by cognitive linguists (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Kövecses 2005, 2010), the conceptualization of *life* is highly metaphorical. Conceptual metaphor can be understood as a mechanism of thought whose essence is “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 5). In the metaphorical process, one experiential domain is partially mapped onto another experiential domain, so that the second domain is partially understood in terms of the first one. The domain that is mapped is called the “source” domain, and the domain onto which the source is mapped is called the “target” domain. What is important, these mappings are not purely abstract or arbitrary, but they are shaped and constrained by a person’s bodily experiences in the world (Barcelona 2000: 3–4; Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 246). These bodily or sensorimotor experiences are often reflected in the so-called preconceptual image schemas, which may become the source domains for metaphorical mappings. For instance, the sentences *Inflation makes me sick* or *If there’s much more inflation, we’ll never survive* illustrate the conceptual metaphor in which inflation is understood by means of the image schema of OBJECT: this abstract entity is described as something with physical attributes (Evans and Green 2006: 191).

However, also cultural experiences may constitute the cognitive motivation for metaphors. The notion of “culture” can refer to acts of human work, as well as to material, intellectual, and artistic creativity; it designates lifestyle together with the system of values, or to be brief, everything that does not come directly from nature (Duszak 1998: 244). Cognitive linguists are also interested in finding out if any and which metaphors are culture-specific, which are narrowly distributed across cultures and which are broadly distributed or even universal (Grady 2007: 204).

On the basis of the classification of conceptual metaphors suggested by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Marcin Kuczok (2014: 90–93) presents a list of conceptual metaphors for *life* in English. They include

ontological and structural metaphors. Ontological metaphors make a non-entity into an entity: these are ways of viewing events, activities, ideas, etc., as entities and substances. For example, in *We need to combat inflation*, inflation is described as if it were an entity (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 4–34). The list of ontological metaphors for *life* in English includes the following:

- (1.1) LIFE IS A CONTAINER
Live your life to the fullest. (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 51)
- (1.2) LIFE IS A GIFT/PRECIOUS POSSESSION
(...) *life as being the most precious commodity, something that we have to cherish and take care of, something precious underestimated by others; valuing and admiring life; a wonderful, beautiful, and dear thing,* (...) (Kövecses 2005: 84)
- (1.3) LIFE IS A BUILDING
Now another young woman's life is in ruins after an appalling attack. (Kövecses 2005: 73)
- (1.4) LIFE IS A MACHINE
(...) *after his or her life broke down, x got it to work again or restarted it.* (Kövecses 2010: 297)
- (1.5) LIFE IS LIGHT
*In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self that seals up all in rest.*
(Sonnet 73 by William Shakespeare) (Kövecses 2010: 55)
- (1.6) LIFE IS FIRE
to snuff out somebody's life (Kövecses 2010: 65)

Furthermore, Kuczok (2014: 91–92) provides a list of structural metaphors for *life* in English. In structural metaphors, one concept is metaphorically structured by another concept, for instance, in *That flat tire cost me an hour* there is the metaphor TIME IS MONEY. The list of structural metaphors for *life* includes the following:

- (2.1) LIFE IS A GAMBLING GAME
If you play your cards right, you can do it. (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 51)
- (2.2) LIFE IS A JOURNEY
Look how far we've come. (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 44)
- (2.2.1) LIFE IS A SEA VOYAGE
Our marriage is on the rocks. (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 45)

- (2.2.2) LIFE IS A CAR JOURNEY
*We're just **spinning our wheels**.* (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 45)
- (2.2.3) LIFE IS A TRAIN JOURNEY
*We've gotten **off the track**.* (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 45)
- (2.3) LIFE IS A STORY
*My life is **an open book**. All too often **open at the wrong page**.* (Mae West) (Kövecses 2010: 47)
- (2.4) LIFE IS A SHOW/PLAY/ENTERTAINMENT
*She always wants **to be in the spotlight**.* (Kövecses 2005: 185)
- (2.5) LIFE IS STRUGGLE/WAR
*(...) life as **battles that have to be won**, people having to **fight throughout life**, people always having to **prove and fight**, which is exhausting and tiring most of the time.* (Kövecses 2005: 84)
- (2.6) LIFETIME IS THE CYCLE OF PLANTS
*My days are like a fading shadow, I am **withering up like grass**.* (Psalm 102: 11)
- (2.7) LIFE IS AN EXPERIMENT
*Do not be too timid and squeamish about your actions. **All life is an experiment**. The more experiments you make the better.* (Ralph W. Emerson)
- (2.8) LIFE IS A TEST
*If I seek him in the north, he is not to be found, invisible as ever, if I turn to the south. And yet he knows every step I take! **Let him test me in the crucible: I shall come out pure gold**.* (Job 23: 9–10)
- (2.9) LIFE IS A (SPORTING) GAME/SPORT
*We went on a long holiday to get out of **the rat race** for a while.* (Kövecses 2010: 146)
- (2.10) LIFE IS A COMPROMISE
*(...) people having to **give up their big dreams**, accepting life as it is given to them, adjusting to the possibilities, and the importance of being **not dissatisfied**.* (Kövecses 2005: 85)
- (2.11) LIFETIME IS A DAY: see example 1.5 above.
- (2.12) LIFE IS A POSSIBILITY
*Life is **like a box of chocolates**.* (Forrest Gump) (Kövecses 2005: 266)
- (2.13) LIFE IS A BUSINESS TRANSACTION
*We may **pay dearly** for our arrogance.* (MED 2002: 1041)
- (2.14) LIFE IS SCHOOL
*One of the most important **lessons in life** is the value of friendship.* (MED 2002: 817)

(2.15) LIFE IS WORK

*Your age can **work against you** in this job.* (OALD 2000: 1552)

(2.16) LIFE IS A COURT TRIAL

*She writes about **the trials of life** on the American frontier.* (MED 2002: 1535)

Additionally, as suggested by Kövecses (2010: 334–335), English literature, especially poetry, is a source of other, more unique conceptual metaphors for *life*. As an example the author provides the metaphors LIFE IS AN OCEAN and LIFE IS A MYSTERY present in René Duvall's poetry, and the metaphors LIFE IS A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME and LIFE IS A VOYAGE IN SPACE from Emily Dickinson's poetry (2010: 55).

It is worth noticing that in other languages there exist certain metaphors for *life* that are different from the ones present in English. For instance, according to a study carried by Riddle (2000) and quoted by Kövecses (2005: 3, 71), the speakers of the Hmong language from Thailand use the metaphor LIFE IS A STRING. It can be hypothesized that the conceptualization of *life* in a particular language is highly motivated by the cultural experiences of the given language community. Such a thesis is postulated by Bogusław Bierwiazzonek (2011: 9–11), who calls English a “marine language”, because the English people have had “the common experience of sailing and interacting with the sea” and their language is a “language of islanders”. As a proof of this claim the author lists a number of collocations, idioms, and proverbs that seem to be underlain by the general metaphor PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A SEA JOURNEY. The metaphor encompasses such mappings as STATES ARE SEA-RELATED LOCATIONS: SEA, WATERS, BAY, PORT (e.g., “to be in dire straits” = to be in a difficult situation), CHANGES IN LIFE ARE CHANGES OF THE COURSE OF SAILING (e.g., “to drift off” = to change from being in one condition into another without realizing it), LONG-TERM, PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITIES ARE JOURNEYS BY SEA (e.g. “to sail through life” = to make progress with little effort), FORCES (FAVORABLE AND ADVERSE) IN LIFE ARE WINDS OR WAVES (e.g., “to swim against the tide” = to oppose what most people think), CONTROLLING LIFE IS CONTROLLING THE SHIP (e.g., “to take the helm” = to take control), HAVING PROBLEMS IS HAVING PROBLEMS WHILE SAILING (e.g., “to be stranded” = to get stuck somewhere), and EXPERIENCING A SITUATION IS BEING IN A BOAT (e.g., “to be in the same boat as somebody” = to be in the same unpleasant situation as someone else).

9.4 Conceptual metaphors for *life* in American English and Hungarian

In the study described by Kövecses, one of his students, Nikolett Köves, prepared a questionnaire that was filled by two groups of people: a group of native American English speakers and a group of native Hungarian speakers. Each group consisted of 20 people. They answered the following four questions:

- 1. How do you view human life in general?
- 2. What does life mean to you?
- 3. What do you consider to be a successful life?
- 4. What is your view on life based on your personal experiences and thoughts? (Köves quoted in Kövecses 2005: 83–86)

The material gathered by Köves was analyzed for the metaphors motivating the descriptions of *life* in both languages. Any other factors that might also influence the way people conceptualize life, such as age, sex or social backgrounds, were not taken into account. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Life metaphors for Hungarians and Americans (adapted from Kövecses 2005: 84)

American English	Hungarian
1. LIFE IS A PRECIOUS POSSESSION	1. LIFE IS STRUGGLE/WAR
2. LIFE IS A GAME	2. LIFE IS A COMPROMISE
3. LIFE IS A JOURNEY	3. LIFE IS A JOURNEY
4. LIFE IS A CONTAINER	4. LIFE IS A GIFT
5. LIFE IS A GAMBLE	5. LIFE IS A POSSIBILITY
6. LIFE IS A COMPROMISE	6. LIFE IS A PUZZLE
7. LIFE IS AN EXPERIMENT	7. LIFE IS A LABYRINTH
8. LIFE IS A TEST	8. LIFE IS A GAME
9. LIFE IS WAR	9. LIFE IS FREEDOM
10. LIFE IS PLAY	10. LIFE IS A CHALLENGE

The top ten metaphors for both Hungarian and American English are mostly structural metaphors, with only three metaphors being ontological: LIFE IS A GIFT in Hungarian and LIFE IS A PRECIOUS POSSESSION and A CONTAINER in American English. The study has shown that for American speakers of English the most common metaphors for *life* are LIFE IS A PRECIOUS POSSESSION and LIFE IS

A GAME while in Hungarian, the most common metaphors are LIFE IS STRUGGLE/WAR and LIFE IS A COMPROMISE. Additionally, in American English there are such source domains as GAMBLE, EXPERIMENT, TEST, and PLAY, which are missing from the top 10 metaphors for LIFE in Hungarian. On the other hand, among the dominant metaphors in Hungarian there are such metaphors as LIFE IS A POSSIBILITY, PUZZLE, LABYRINTH, FREEDOM, and CHALLENGE, which are absent from the top 10 life metaphors in American English. According to Kövecses (2005: 241), these results are motivated by the different cultural and historical experiences of the people living in Hungary and in America: while Hungarians frequently had to defend their country and fight in numerous wars, Americans could engage in making their careers and pursuing their dreams in the new world, a free country of new possibilities.

9.5 Conceptual metaphors for *life* in Polish

On the basis of the research conducted by Köves and discussed above, 20 native speakers of Polish were given a similar questionnaire with the following questions in Polish:

1. Opisz swoje ogólne poglądy na życie.
2. Czym jest życie dla Ciebie osobiście?
3. Czym według Ciebie jest sukces życiowy?
4. Jaka jest Twoja wizja życia na podstawie osobistych przeżyć i doświadczeń?

Exactly as in the case of the research conducted by Köves, other factors, such as age, sex, and social backgrounds of the informants were ignored. The results show that the top 10 metaphors for *life* in Polish involve the source domains of JOURNEY, WORK/EFFORT, WAR/STRUGGLE, SCHOOL, A PRECIOUS POSSESSION, CONTAINER, A THREAD/STRING, A COMPROMISE, A QUEST/SEARCH, AND A MYSTERY. These metaphors are listed below with an exemplary sentence or phrase illustrating a given metaphor. In the brackets, the number of instances identified in the analyzed material is provided. The bold font was used to help identify the conceptual metaphors behind these examples.

- (1) LIFE IS A JOURNEY (25)

Droga pełną wzlotów i upadków. ([Life is] A way full of ups and downs.)

(2) LIFE IS WORK/EFFORT (14)

Każdy jest kowalem swojego losu, więc tylko dzięki ciężkiej pracy, determinacji (...) jesteśmy w stanie realizować swoje marzenia. (Everyone is a **blacksmith for their fate**, so we are able to realize our dreams only thanks to **hard work** and determination.)

(3) LIFE IS WAR/STRUGGLE (12)

Życie to walka każdego dnia o to, żeby zrealizować swoje plany. (Life is an everyday **fight** to realize your dreams.)

(4) LIFE IS SCHOOL (12)

Staram się brać lekcje z najbardziej prozaicznych doświadczeń. (I'm trying to **take lessons** from the most prosaic experiences.)

(5) LIFE IS A PRECIOUS POSSESSION (11)

Życie mija szybko, więc trzeba się cieszyć każdym dniem i doceniać to, co się ma. (Life is passing fast, so one needs to **enjoy every day** and **appreciate what one has**.)

(6) LIFE IS A CONTAINER (10)

Życie jest dla mnie tym, co pełne jest miłości i zrozumienia. (Life for me is **something full of** love and understanding.)

(7) LIFE IS A THREAD/STRING (9)

Życie to czas, gdy szczęście przeplata się ze smutkiem. (Life is the time when happiness is **interlaced** with sadness.)

(8) LIFE IS A COMPROMISE (8)

Trzeba szanować innych i umieć żyć w zgodzie z innymi. (It's necessary to respect others and **be able to agree with them**.)

(9) LIFE IS A QUEST/SEARCH (7)

To, co większość społeczeństwa uważa za „sukces” i poszukuje tego przez całe życie (...) traci wszelkie znaczenie, gdy nadchodzą ostatnie chwile. (What most of the public consider to be “success” and what they are **searching for** all their lives (...) loses its significance when one's last days come.)

(10) LIFE IS A MYSTERY (6)

Wielkim darem i zadaniem, ale także i – bardzo często – zupełną niewiadomą. ([Life is] A great gift and task, but also – and very often – **something completely unknown**.)

Other metaphors for *life* in Polish included the following (the number in the brackets indicates the number of identified instances of the metaphor use):

(11) LIFE IS A POSSIBILITY/CHANCE (5)

Życie przytrafia nam się tylko raz i drugiej szansy nie dostaniemy. (Life happens to us only once and we are not given a **second chance**.)

(12) LIFE IS A GIFT (5)

*Jestem katolikiem i uważam je za piękny, ale i wymagający (w pewnym sensie) **dar** Boga (...).* (I am Catholic and consider life to be a beautiful, but demanding (in a way) **gift** from God (...).)

(13) LIFE IS A CHANGE (3)

*No i trzeba starać się **być lepszym każdego dnia**, tzn. **lepszą wersją siebie**.* (Well, it is necessary to **try to be better every day**, that is, to be a better version of yourself.)

(14) LIFE IS PLANNING (3)

*My żyjemy tylko jeden raz i musimy wszystkie **swoje plany zrealizować**.* (We live only once and we need to **realize all our plans**.)

(15) LIFE IS A CYCLE OF PLANTS (2)

*Przede wszystkim w życiu chodzi o zmiany – tylko zmiany są w stanie **ochronić nas przed** **wegetacją** i **pomóc oszacować czas**.* (Life is above all about changes – only changes may protect us against **vegetation** and help calculate time.)

(16) LIFE IS ENERGY/POWER (2)

*W chwilach, gdy takich kłopotów nie mamy powinniśmy **naładować baterie**.* (In the moments when we don't have such trouble, we should **charge batteries**.)

(17) LIFE IS FREEDOM (2)

*Pozwólmy każdemu **przeżyć to jedyne życie tak, jak tego chce**, o ile nie narusza tym swobody i komfortu innych.* (Let's allow everyone to live **this only life in the way they want it to be**, provided that it doesn't interfere with the freedom and comfort of others.)

Additionally, in the studied material, it was possible to identify 10 further conceptual metaphors, although each of them was illustrated by only one instance of use. They were: LIFE IS A GAME/CHALLENGE, LIFE IS A PERSON, LIFE IS A TEST, LIFE IS AN EXPERIMENT, LIFE IS AN (UNSPECIFIED) OBJECT, LIFE IS A FLUID, LIFE IS A RACE, LIFE IS A CALCULATION, LIFE IS A WHOLE, AND LIFE IS FOOD.

From the point of view of the typological classification of conceptual metaphors, most of the metaphors identified in the answers to the questionnaire given by the Polish native speakers are structural metaphors. Out of the 27 metaphors listed above, 19 can be classified as structural metaphors: LIFE IS WORK/EFFORT, WAR/STRUGGLE, A SCHOOL, A COMPROMISE, A QUEST/SEARCH, A MYSTERY, A JOURNEY, A POSSIBILITY/CHANCE, A CHANGE, PLANNING, A CYCLE OF PLANTS, ENERGY/POWER, FREEDOM, A GAME/CHALLENGE, A TEST, AN EXPERIMENT, A RACE, A CALCULATION, AND A WHOLE. THE REMAINING 8 ONTOLOGICAL METAPHORS INCLUDE: LIFE IS A PRECIOUS POSSES-

SION, A CONTAINER, A THREAD/STRING, A GIFT, A PERSON, AN (UNSPECIFIED) OBJECT, A FLUID, AND FOOD.

Generally speaking, the analysis has shown that the conceptualization of *life* in Polish is very serious when compared to the metaphors for *life* in American English and Hungarian. Such source domains as PLAY, GAME, GAMBLE, EXPERIMENT OR FREEDOM, which indicate activities with positive connotations, seem to be absent or very rare in Polish, while in both American English and Hungarian they are among the top 10 life metaphors. Instead, the Polish informants commonly used such metaphors AS LIFE IS A JOURNEY AND LIFE IS A QUEST/SEARCH. Perhaps this tendency reflects the mobility and willingness to emigrate in order to seek new life opportunities, which seems to be common in today's Polish society. According to the statistics for the period between 2004 and 2013, published by the Central Statistical Office of Poland, the total number of Polish emigrants has reached around 2,196,000 in 2013¹, while the population of Poland was around 38 million people in the same year. By contrast, the population of Hungary, which was around 10 million people in 2010, decreased only by 191,000 people between 2001 and 2010 because of emigration. When it comes to the USA, the proportions are even smaller: the last official statistics published for 1999 showed that only around 4.1 million Americans out of the total population of around 281 million people lived abroad for non-military reasons.

Furthermore, the presence of such metaphors as LIFE IS EFFORT/WORK and LIFE IS SCHOOL in Polish may illustrate the strong awareness of the important role of hard work and education in the job market in today's socio-economic reality in Poland. Again, the official data shows that in December 2014, the unemployment rate in the country was 11.5%, while in Hungary it was 7.1%, and in the United States the rate was only 5.6%. The lack of certainty about the future caused by the constantly changing political and economic situation – entering the free market economy after 1989, and then periods of political and economic reforms – may be responsible for the metaphor *LIFE IS A MYSTERY*. What is more, the presence of the metaphors *LIFE IS WAR* and *LIFE IS A COMPROMISE* may be influenced by the historical background of the Polish people: the numerous past wars, especially World War I and II, even the partitions in the 18th century, then the Nazi occupation and communist oppression in the 20th century that seem to be prevalent in the memory of the Polish nation.

¹ These calculations take into account only those people whose permanent address is in Poland and whose emigration is temporary. According to unofficial statistics of Poles who live abroad permanently, even about 21 million Poles live in other countries of the world.

9.6 Conclusions

The preferred source domains in the *life* metaphors in American English, Hungarian, and Polish seem to be strongly motivated by the cultural and historical experiences of people representing the three nations. While for Hungarians the most common metaphors are LIFE IS STRUGGLE/WAR and A COMPROMISE, for Americans these are LIFE IS A PRECIOUS POSSESSION and A GAME, and for Poles they are LIFE IS A JOURNEY and WORK/EFFORT. Furthermore, despite the fact that there are certain common tendencies in the metaphorical conceptualization of *life* in these three languages, which encompass the employment of such source domains as JOURNEY, WAR/STRUGGLE, and A COMPROMISE, each of them is also characterized by certain unique metaphors for *life*. Thus, while among the top ten metaphors in American English there are the metaphors LIFE IS A GAMBLE, A TEST, AN EXPERIMENT, and PLAY, in Hungarian there are the metaphors LIFE IS A POSSIBILITY, A GIFT, A PUZZLE, A LABYRINTH, and FREEDOM, and in Polish there are the metaphors LIFE IS WORK/EFFORT, SCHOOL, THREAD/STRING, QUEST/SEARCH, and MYSTERY.

In spite of the fact that the comparative study presented in this paper was based on only 20 informants representing each language, and that other factors which might have influenced the answers in the questionnaire, such as the sex, age, and social backgrounds of the respondents, were ignored, the differences in the metaphors used in the compared languages seem to correspond to the cultural differences between them. Perhaps it would be a good idea to continue this type of contrastive research on a bigger group of respondents, taking into account also the ignored factors in order to see if and how they influence the conceptualization of *life*. Nevertheless, even our general comparison has produced results worth analyzing.

To conclude, it should be emphasized that even though the English word *life*, Hungarian *élet*, and Polish *życie* refer to the same reality, our contrastive analysis has revealed that people from the United States of America, Hungary, and Poland think and talk about this reality in different ways.

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